

By all accounts, it was just another beautiful Saturday morning when a young congresswoman, known for her devotion to serving her constituents, joined her staff for an informal public gathering outside a local supermarket in Tucson, Arizona. The lawmaker had tweeted only minutes before, “My 1st Congress on Your Corner starts now. Please stop by to let me know what is on your mind or tweet me later.” Unknown to her, among the eager citizens standing in line that warm day was a force of evil bent on taking the lives of innocent Americans.

The January 8 shooting that critically injured Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords and claimed the lives of six others while wounding 13, jarred the nation. The senseless horror of the act perpetrated by an obsessed and unstable shooter calls to mind similar tragedies on the campus of Virginia Tech, at Columbine High School and at Fort Hood, Texas.

The nightmarish event has understandably evoked a range of emotions from the public – from utter shock to outrage. Upon hearing the sad news of the attack on Rep. Giffords, I was reminded of the 1981 attempt on the life of President Ronald Reagan. Equally traumatic for our nation, it, too, involved the collision of a mentally unbalanced individual with our open democracy.

Rep. Giffords, or Gabby, as she is known to her friends, is hardly a controversy-seeking figure. A Hurricane Katrina relief volunteer, a motorcycle enthusiast, formerly Arizona’s youngest state senator, the wife of a Navy captain and astronaut, an independent congresswoman known for striking a conservative tone among her Democrat colleagues, Gabby Giffords combines in one person the enthusiasm and hope of our nation.

Gabby and I briefly served together on the House Science and Technology Committee where I found her to be approachable and always willing to put the country's needs first. She is a maverick in her party – the author of legislation to cut the pay of Members of Congress and an ardent supporter of the Second Amendment. She has the grit and spark that one observer compared to Annie Oakley. Unfortunately, those who take high profile positions in our society can sometimes attract the attention of persons intent on committing evil acts.

The wrenching attack on Rep. Giffords also took the lives of six people, each a terrible tragedy: A congressional staffer, a federal district judge, a husband, a wife, a grandmother, and a beautiful nine-year-old. There were also the heroes. Foremost, the quick-thinking congressional intern who rushed to Gabby's side to raise her head, applying pressure to stop the flow of blood from her wound, assuring his boss that she was not alone. Praise is also due to those who rushed the gunman, wrestling him to the ground and securing his ammunition before he could inflict even more harm.

Beyond our tears and prayers, there is much to think about in the wake of this horrific event. Already, some have questioned the continued openness of our government and the accessibility of our public servants. I think it would be a loss for our democracy if we allowed this tragedy to take away the close working relationships our elected officials enjoy with the public. Congressional town meetings where citizens can ask questions and express views, including those contrary to popular sentiment, are vital to maintaining the public's direct connection with their representatives. As Speaker John Boehner reminds us, Congress is "the people's house." It must not be walled off from the people.

Much reflection is taking place in Washington and around the nation as Americans try to find ways to transform this dark event into catalyst for good. During last week's public ceremony honoring those killed and wounded, President Obama gave what I felt was one of his best speeches as he sought to unify and heal our country.

I join all my colleagues in Congress and all of you in praying for her and all those who were victim to this isolated tragic attack.

### **New Committee Assignments:**

The 112th Congress has not only brought a new political majority to the U.S. House, but also new committee assignments. Speaker John Boehner has named me chairman of the House Committee on Ethics. This new position carries much responsibility and I am humbled to serve as chairman.

Also this month, Appropriations Committee Chairman Harold Rogers of Kentucky appointed me to serve on the Defense and Financial Services subcommittees. These new seats will allow Southwest Alabama to have a greater voice in shaping our national defense and banking policies. I will continue to serve on the subcommittee on Commerce, Justice and Science whose jurisdiction includes fishery issues vital to our coastal economy.

My staff and I work for you. If we can ever be of service, do not hesitate to call my office toll free at 1-800-288-8721.